

Alethic Deflationism and Normativity: A Critique

Deflacionismo Alético e Normatividade: Uma Crítica

Massimo Dell'Utri¹

Abstract: The paper starts by highlighting that virtually nobody would object to claims such as “to regard an assertion or a belief or a thought as true or false *is* to regard it as being right or wrong”—a claim that shows that truth is *intrinsically normative*. It is well known that alethic deflationists deny this. Paul Horwich, for instance, maintains that nothing shows that TRUTH is a normative concept in the way that OUGHT is. By relying on a distinction among dimensions of normativity I will try to pinpoint the weakness of Horwich’s argument in the fact that he works with a strong, uncalled-for, interpretation of normativity, whereas a weaker interpretation is more than enough. However, the impression might persist that a different understanding of the normativity of truth on the part of deflationists could eventually show the compatibility between alethic deflationism and normativity. The remaining part of the paper is devoted to contend that this is a wrong impression. Accordingly, it is stated that the normativity exerted by truth is ascribable in the final analysis to the world, and the provocative claim is defended that alethic deflationism lacks the conceptual resources to account for the relation between language and the world.

Keywords: Normativity, Alethic Deflationism, Paul Horwich, Michael Dummett, Filippo Ferrari, the world.

Resumo: O artigo começa destacando que praticamente ninguém se opõe a reivindicações como "considerar uma afirmação, uma crença ou um pensamento como verdadeiro ou falso é considerá-lo como correto ou errado" - uma afirmação que mostra que a verdade é intrinsecamente normativa. Sabe-se que os deflacionistas aléticos negam isso. Paul Horwich, por exemplo, sustenta que nada mostra que a verdade é um conceito normativo da maneira que deveria ser. Ao confiar em uma distinção entre as dimensões da normatividade, tentarei identificar a fraqueza do argumento de Horwich no fato de que ele trabalha com uma interpretação de normatividade forte, desnecessária, quando uma interpretação mais fraca seria mais do que suficiente. No entanto, a impressão pode persistir de que uma compreensão diferente da normatividade da verdade por parte dos deflacionistas poderia eventualmente mostrar a compatibilidade entre o deflacionismo e a normatividade alética. A parte restante do artigo dedica-se a afirmar que esta é uma impressão errada. Por conseguinte, afirma-se que a normatividade exercida pela verdade é imputável, em última análise, ao mundo, e a reivindicação provocativa é defendida de que o deflacionismo alético não possui os recursos conceituais para explicar a relação entre a linguagem e o mundo.

Palavras-Chave: Normatividade, Deflacionismo Alético, Paul Horwich, Michael Dummett, Filippo Ferrari, Mundo.

¹ University of Sassari <dellutri@uniss.it>

The aim of this paper is to show that the alethic deflationists' discussion of the thesis according to which truth is a normative concept has not displayed any real progress in the last sixty years or so. In fact, the well-known critical remark put forward in 1959 by Michael Dummett (see below) has not so far received a plausible answer from the various deflationisms in the field. Moreover, in the final part of the paper I will try to explain why every deflationary explanation of the normativity of truth is doomed to failure. Now, for a start, let us focus on an aspect of common linguistic usage.

1. Dimensions of Normativity

Virtually nobody would object to claims such as “to regard an assertion or a belief or a thought as true or false *is* to regard it as being right or wrong” (Putnam 1999, 69). In fact, it appears a piece of common philosophical wisdom to think that—in virtue of truth’s reverberations in the manifold uses we make of the word “true”—truth exerts a normative constraint on statements. That piece of wisdom finds its rationale in a careful scrutiny of humans’ linguistic practice, as it is revealed by one of the harshest forms of criticism we might level against a statement we happen to hear, i.e. that ‘it is not true’. Failure to accurately reflect what is the case immediately proves a statement to be invalid—although perhaps useful for the purpose of deceiving.² Within the framework of our general cognitive activity, if a statement falls short of adapting to how things stand, then it shows itself to be a useless piece of information. Notice the parallel left implicit here between being true and adapting to (or describing) how things stand—a parallel that seems to be expressed by the well-known Equivalence Principle, *It is true that p if, and only if, p*, for any statement *p*. In the light of this principle, we may say that a norm for the correctness of our statements is given by truth or, equivalently, by how things stand—by the world, to be briefer.³

² See e.g. Cozzo 2014, 118 ff.

³ One may object that all this at best shows that our uses of the word “truth” are normative, or that our concept of truth is normative, and that saying this is very different from saying that truth itself is normative (I thank a referee for this remark). I think that, taken literally, this is right. However, my idea is that truth is nothing over and above our uses of the word “true” and cognates. More generally, truth is nothing apart from the uses we make of it in thought and language—equivalently, apart from the concept of truth. And the latter is given by the (many different) ways in which we employ the

However, when it comes to the relation of explicative priority between what is said to be true and the world, it is the latter that wields an indisputable advantage. A portion of the world is as it is not because we say that the statement that describes this portion is true; on the contrary, it is the “statement [that] is true only if there is something in the world *in virtue of which* it is true” (Dummett 1959, 14). This is a sample of philosophical awareness we have possessed since Aristotle’s times (*Metaphysics* Θ, 10, 1051^b6-9), and the great Greek philosopher gave voice to nothing more than a piece of common sense, an intuition⁴ that characterizes a basic trait of our thinking.

Taking this on board, let us try to provide an answer to the following three questions: Should the normative dimension into which statements (and beliefs) are plunged be attributed to *truth*? Is truth *intrinsically normative*? Is TRUTH a *normative concept*?

To all three questions alethic deflationists reply a resounding “No!”. The reason behind this reaction is that, according to them, truth’s utility is purely expressive (“It is merely a useful *expressive device*”: Horwich 2016a, 100), it does not have any nature (the property of truth is *not substantial*), and if we come to master the concept it is because we have learnt to master (non-contradictory) instances of the Equivalence Principle. A mere *description* of the use speakers make of the word ‘true’ is all there is to a theory of truth, according to deflationists. It is the latter aspect of deflationism that prompted Dummett’s criticism.⁵

By drawing a parallel between truth and falsity, on the one hand, and winning and losing in the game of chess, on the other—between usage of the words ‘true’ and ‘false’, on the one hand, and usage of the pieces on a chessboard, on the other—Dummett stressed that the *description* of the

word. In other words, I think that the concept of truth is constituted by our abilities to use “true” in the relevant contexts, where these abilities are *world-involving*. As Paul Horwich says (and I agree), a theory of truth itself has to specify “the explanatorily fundamental facts about truth” (Horwich 1998, 37). We will see below that, unlike him, I count wordly facts among the facts about truth (and not only instances of the Equivalence Principle). From this point of view it is possible to say that truth itself is normative, however indirectly.

⁴ Some authors think this is a *realist* intuition, but it need not be so. As to Dummett, in the 1959 paper referred to in the text he thought that this intuition is a step in the direction of realism, but had to change his mind later on (cf. Dummett 2007, 346-47).

⁵ Actually the object of Dummett’s analysis was the redundancy theory, but his point easily extends to the whole deflationary field.

rules of chess, the initial position, the permissible moves, the possible final positions, leaves out one vital point: that it is the object of a player to win. In his words, “It is part of the concept of winning a game that a player plays to win, and this part of the concept is not conveyed by a classification of the end positions into winning ones and losing ones. [...] Likewise, it is part of the concept of truth that we aim at making true statements” (Dummett 1959, 2), a part not conveyed by a *description* of the use of the words ‘true’ and ‘false’. Here, for Dummett, taking truth as an aim amounts to valuing truth, in that we would not take anything as an aim to attain if we did not put a value of some kind on it; valuing truth may in turn amount to taking it as a *norm*—which prescribes to reach the aim and establishes whether a given statement has managed to reach it. Note that each step does not necessarily entail the other (we will come back to this point below).

Thus, for Dummett TRUTH is a normative concept and deflationism an incomplete account of truth, given that this account is grounded solely on the Equivalence Principle and this Principle is unable to capture the normativity in question—the fact that we value truth and take it as an aim within our linguistic and rational practice.

Paul Horwich, one of the leading deflationists on the scene today, has devoted several writings to the analysis of normativity, arguing that it poses no threat to deflationism. In fact, he claims, even if truth stands for something normatively significant, “this doesn’t show that it’s a normative concept in the way that OUGHT is, and that our word ‘true’ is a normative term” (Horwich 2016b, 2). According to Horwich, there is a useful distinction to be made when the phrase “normative concept” is at stake:

On the one hand, a given concept may be a *concept used to evaluate* (thereby making the term that expresses it a normative term); [...] on the other hand, the application of a concept that isn’t evaluative, so isn’t *functionally* normative, may well have normative *significance* (Horwich 2016b, 2).

I take it that by “functionally normative” Horwich here means “intrinsically normative”: the feature that enables a given object or concept to function in a given way cannot but be an intrinsic feature of the object or concept itself. Now, Horwich goes on to say that

the concept TRUTH surely does stand for something normatively significant. But this doesn't show that it's a normative concept in the way that OUGHT is, and that our word 'true' is a normative term (Horwich 2016b, 2).

So, either TRUTH is on a level with OUGHT, i.e. a concept used to evaluate, revealing a functionally normative nature, or it is not functionally normative and has merely a normative import. For Horwich only the latter obtains.

I have a remark about this.

Being “a normative concept in the way that OUGHT is” is not the only way for a concept to be normative. In fact, there are some distinctions regarding the concept of normativity that seem to escape Horwich's otherwise careful eye. These have recently been highlighted by Filippo Ferrari, who has usefully summarised the rather wide literature on the subject, whilst making some interesting points of his own (cf. Ferrari 2016a, 2016b and 2016c). According to Ferrari, when we apply the word “true” in its normative function to a statement *p*, or when we say that ‘true’ is a normative term, we can (at least) mean one (or more) of the four following different things: that *p* is correct, that *p* is valuable, that *p* is the target we aimed at in the course of a given inquiry and then struck, or that one ought to state that *p*. In other words, attribution of truth to a statement may signal that: one deems the statement correct; or the statement is good to make; or the statement is the goal one was aiming at; or that everybody ought to make the statement. Truth may thus function as a criterion to differentiate the correct statements from the incorrect ones, or as a value-conferrer, or as the aim of inquiry, or as the sign of the obligation to make a given statement. From this we may distinguish (at least) four dimensions of the normativity expressed by truth: *critical*, *axiological*, *teleological* and *deontic*—respectively.

Now, little reflection suffices to show that these dimensions are independent of one another and, moreover, that the criterial dimension is the most basic one.⁶ Indeed, thinking that we ought to make statement *p* can be taken to be on a par with thinking that we ought to aim at *p*—more

⁶ One of Ferrari's aims is that of arguing for a *pluralist* conception of the normativity of truth, i.e. the idea that there is a plurality of normative principles, each tied to a specific domain of discourse. As it will be clear in what follows, it is here that I part company with him.

precisely, that in a given context of inquiry p represents a right goal. From this it ensues that the deontic dimension entails the teleological one. Moreover, thinking that we ought to aim at p entails thinking that p is valuable. We would not feel an obligation to utter p (in normal conditions) and aim at it if we did not consider p worthy of being uttered and aimed at. This seems to reflect our general attitude of feeling an obligation to mainly take the courses of action we find beneficial. Thus, the teleological dimension entails the axiological one. The latter in turn entails the criterial dimension, in that thinking that p is valuable brings in its wake thinking that p is a correct statement—one that gets the portion of reality it deals with right. In fact, if we treasure statements, it is because we usually suppose they get things right, and therefore are of some use in making us achieve our practical and theoretical goals. Putting all this together we then have that, by way of transitivity, the deontic dimension entails the criterial one.

The contrary route is not equally guaranteed though. Thinking that a statement is correct does not necessarily show that we are disposed to put a value on it—we might simply remain neutral on this point. The statement “I had breakfast this morning” is surely correct, but quite unexpectedly I could not afford any jam or milk: just a rancid coffee and a slice of stale bread—not so valuable a breakfast to be honest. *A fortiori*, thinking that a statement is correct does not show that we should feel an obligation towards its assertion. I would rather keep the statement regarding my poor breakfast to myself, rather than shout it from the rooftops. By the same token, thinking that a statement is valuable does not necessarily entail that it should be the aim of a given inquiry—its truth might be so plain or trivial that there is simply no need for any inquiry to discover it. Moreover, thinking that a statement is valuable does not entail that we ought to make it. I definitively value the statement “Every other morning I give a small sum of money to the beggar on the corner”, but I do not feel any obligation to make this truth knowable as soon as I talk to anybody.

All this can make enough ground for arguing in favour of the independence these four dimensions of normativity have from one another and, in addition, it allows us to catch a glimpse of why the criterial dimension is the most fundamental one. But there is something more to be said.

Within the four dimensions of normativity there is a norm—a distinct one for each dimension. The examples we have been putting forward concern *particular* statements, but their validity depends on there being a *general* norm which drives to a given conclusion. In fact, broadly speaking anything which has a bearing on our thinking or verbal and non-verbal behaviour is a norm, and therefore a value, an aim, an obligation and a criterion can well be taken as norms. Up to this point we have been taking these norms as norms of *truth*, given that we have been speaking of normative dimensions of *truth* and, implicitly, of truth as a value, an aim, a duty, a criterion. However, on closer scrutiny the first three appear more to be norms of *truth-telling*⁷ than of truth—or of *truth-believing*, for that matter.⁸ Both in ordinary and philosophical talk, when we say that truth in general represents a value we actually mean that in normal circumstances we would be valuable persons if we opted for telling what is true rather than what is false. Likewise, when we say that truth in general is an aim of inquiry,⁹ we implicitly mean that telling true statements is usually what we aim at in the course of our cognitive activity. And when we say that in general we feel an obligation towards truth, what we mean is that we ought to utter whatever statement is true in the particular context we find ourselves in, thereby revealing the *moral* overtone truth-telling can have. Thus, it is in the light of the value, the aim or the duty to *tell* the truth that the axiological, the teleological and the deontic dimensions, respectively, acquire their proper significance. That is why the norms that are in place within these dimensions should better be seen as *norms of truth-telling*, rather than *norms of truth*. With the norm characteristic of the criterial dimension—the criterial norm—things are

⁷ Cf. Bilgrami 2007, 389 ff. Bilgrami deals with the *value* of telling the truth, distinguishing it from the value of truth, but his point is extendable to the questions regarding the aim and the duty (not the criterion, as it is explained in the text).

⁸ Cf. e.g. Horwich 2006. (Horwich talks about “the value of having beliefs that are true”, but also his point is easily extendable to the topics regarding *aiming at true beliefs* and *feeling a duty to fix true beliefs*.)

⁹ Following Bilgrami, I do not take “inquiry” in a narrow sense: “The range of inquiry is not restricted to science but to all of commonsense thought. In this broad sense, there is inquiry where there is thought in the sense of belief, where there is thought that is capable of being true or false” (Bilgrami 2007, 386). Cf. also “By ‘inquiry’ I mean simply the process of asking and answering questions, from the sublime ‘Can something come from nothing?’ to the mundane ‘Where are my car keys?’” (Lynch 2009, 12).

different, though, given that what has to do with the correctness of what we think or say is just *truth per se*: “true” and “correct” are deeply intertwined, and we see this *immediately* by way of intuition, not of argument. As we remarked at the beginning, it is a sheer datum about our linguistic practice that nobody would object to claims such as “to regard an assertion or a belief or a thought as true or false *is* to regard it as being right or wrong”, given the standards of correctness appropriate to the kind of assertion, belief or thought in question; this remark reveals that at a fundamental level we feel that truth possesses a normative nature that has to do with the *correctness* of what we think or say, and points out that the only normative dimension we naturally attribute to truth is the criterial one. It is the criterial norm that, in conclusion, is the one which rightly deserves to be called the “norm of truth”.

All this can be exploited in order to give an answer to Horwich. As we have seen, he equates the purported normativity embedded in the concept TRUTH with the incontestable normativity embedded in the concept OUGHT. This shows that he is working with the *deontic* dimension—the strongest one—and thus it comes as no surprise that he ends by denying this is a dimension of truth, and quite rightly so, because it is not. Rather, what is surprising is his conclusion that truth has no normative dimension at all, a conclusion that springs directly from a failure to appreciate the existence of a plurality of normative dimensions and the fact that truth’s own dimension is the criterial one.¹⁰ We will point out below the actual reason why truth’s own dimension is the criterial one; for the time being let’s take stock.

2. The Bearing of All This on Deflationism

The foregoing analysis allows us to answer the three questions with which we started—should the normative dimension into which statements (and beliefs) are plunged be attributed to *truth*? Is truth *intrinsically normative*? Is TRUTH a *normative concept*? The answers to the latter two questions are in the affirmative, provided that we interpret the normative

¹⁰ As far as I can make out, Engel makes the same point when he claims that “truth is a norm of assertion (and of belief) in the sense in which, for any belief whatsoever, it is an objection against this belief to say that it is false and that it is *normal* (in the sense that it is the rule) to try to revise it. It is, if you like, a conceptual norm and not an ethical or epistemic norm” (cf. Rorty and Engel 2007, 21).

in the sense described. As to our first question, answering it may reveal something about the general performance of alethic deflationism.

Recall Dummett's claim to the effect that "a statement is true only if there is something in the world *in virtue of which* it is true": we exploited it at the outset to stress the fact that the behaviour of truth is actually guided by the world. Thus, as far as normativity is concerned, in the final analysis it is *the world* that constitutes the actual norm of our thinking and talking: strictly speaking, the normativity usually attributed to truth pertains to the world.¹¹ To briefly state the point, the idea is that much of what truth comes to is the use of a word—the word "true"; an integral part of this use is stressing the correctness of a given statement; but a statement is correct because it says "how things stand"; therefore, the actual parameter of correctness is the world—truth is just the mouthpiece of the world, as it were, it *represents* the world on the level of language: in this respect it plays a *vicarious* role. The answer to our first question is therefore in the negative: the normative dimension into which statements (and beliefs) are plunged is ruled by the world, which in turn infuses truth with normative content.

By the way, we are now in a position to understand the real reason why the criterial dimension is the only normative dimension that pertains to truth. The fact is that the world can account just for the criterial dimension of normativity: it is virtually impossible to maintain that the world confers a value on truth, or gives the character of an aim to truth, or attributes a moral obligation to it. It is human beings, not the world, who put values, aims, and establish deontic dimensions.

Now, let's give a new twist to our argument.

If the actual norm of correctness is supplied by the world, we have that in giving an elucidation of truth it is of the utmost importance to give an account of the role the world plays in the speaking of a language—and, in general, in our rational activity. But alethic deflationists not only refuse to involve the world in the elucidation of truth: they actually lack the conceptual resources which would allow us to account for the relation between language and the world. Therefore, they cannot explain even the most basic and commonsensical form of normativity—criterial normativity—that thought and language are subject to.

¹¹ Here "the world" has to be taken in its broadest possible sense, not only the empirical world but also that which is moral, aesthetical, mathematical, juridical and so forth.

But why does deflationism lack the conceptual resources to account for the relation between language and the world?

The answer is twofold. Firstly, let's exploit the passage by Dummett we have already come across. Whatever its flaws,

the correspondence theory expresses one important feature of the concept of truth which is not expressed by the law 'It is true that p iff p ' [...]: that a statement is true only if there is something in the world *in virtue of which* it is true (Dummett 1959, 14).

What Dummett is saying is that nothing in the (Tarskian or any other version of the equivalence) principle and its instances can guarantee that the truth of the statement involved is accounted for by something in the world—even taking the phrase “the world” in its broadest possible sense. Accordingly, nothing in the principle and its instances shows that a connection between language and the world is in place. One way to see this is realizing that the two sides of any instance of the equivalence principle are “cognitively equivalent” (Künne 2007, 316): therefore, “ p ” alone cannot convey more information than the one contained in “It is true that p ” (and vice versa). In particular, it cannot convey any information regarding a given portion of the world (the portion “ p ” refers to) which is not already contained in “It is true that p ”—hence no information that might be used to explain *in virtue of what* the statement is true.

Another way to see this point is realizing that

Predicates like ‘ x is made true by y ’ or ‘ x is true in virtue of y ’ signify asymmetrical relations, so we cannot preserve the point of the slogan “No sentence is true but reality makes it so” by using a “symmetrical” (commutative) connective [...]. The Disquotation Schema is no substitute for the principle which that slogan encapsulates (Künne 2007, 317-18).

Thus, the side of any instance of the principle that does not mention truth is unable to provide a genuine reference to what is *out there* and makes statements true or false.

Secondly, deflationists' elucidation of truth hinges

only on the most general *formal* features of our language—for instance, the fact that our language has somewhat the structure of quantificational

languages—the utility for us of the concept of truth seems to be a fact which is quite independent of the existence or non-existence of interesting ‘picturing’ or referential relations between our language and the world (Leeds 1978, 44).

It is not that deflationists deny the existence of the world (they are no sceptics) or the role it plays in our lives: they maintain that the world has no role in the elucidation of what truth and meaning are. But the fact is that their will to strip truth of any explanatory strength (including the relation to the world as part of that strength) and their effort to place the whole truth-talk on a merely formal level make the step from the latter to the level of the world nothing but an external *ad hoc* juxtaposition, something the deflationists provide no genuine guarantee for.

Whatever their efforts, therefore, deflationists have not been able to give a plausible answer to the critical remark put forward in 1959 by Michael Dummett: for one thing, they have been discussing the normativity regarding truth-telling and truth-believing, not truth; for another, they have persistently refused to involve the relation between language and the world in their elucidation of truth, taking it merely for granted with no adequate philosophical backup. This is why, in conclusion, the deflationists’ discussion of normativity has not displayed any real progress in the last sixty years or so.¹²

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¹² I would like to thank David Brett, Filippo Ferrari and an anonymous referee for very helpful comments on the first draft of this article.

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Endereço postal

University of Sassari
Dipartimento di Scienze Umanistiche e Sociali
Via Roma, 151
07100 Sassari

Data de recebimento: 27/11/2017

Data de aceite: 11/03/2018